



# Social Responsibility in Islam: Quranic Principles, Hadiths, and Modern Implications

*“The faithful, in their love for one another, in their mercy for one another, and in their kindness toward one another, are like one body; when a member of it ails, all (the parts of) the body call one another (to share the pain) through sleeplessness and fever.” (Muslim)*

## Introduction: What Is Social Responsibility in Islam?

Social responsibility in Islam goes beyond personal piety; it encompasses how individuals interact with and uplift their communities. Islamic teachings, rooted in the Qur'an and Hadith, emphasize justice, mercy, and mutual care — making Islam not only a spiritual path but a complete social system. This article explores how **Islamic social justice, community solidarity,** and **ethical conduct** were central to Prophet Muhammad's mission.

## Islamic View on Social Responsibility and Worship

The difference between Islam and most other religions is that it did not content itself with merely establishing acts of worship while abandoning the needs of society to a Caesar or any form of temporal governing body. Rather, Islam established ways of conduct, relationships, and rights and obligations for the individual vis-à-vis members of his family and the nation, and for the nation vis-à-vis other nations. The reform of society was the main target of Islam. Even acts of worship contribute to achieving this reform. Within the framework of human society, the Islamic nation is a compact union, having recourse to itself, possessing an inner sense of responsibility for its own members, and resisting decay—both individually and collectively.

## Takaful in Islam: The Framework of Social Solidarity

This social solidarity (*takaful*) is apparent in all aspects of Prophet Muhammad's message. The history of mankind shows that few societies have developed as strong a sense of solidarity, or



The individual's responsibility for the community in Islamic societies—and conversely, the community's responsibility for the individual—is of primary magnitude, constituting a trust of life and the highest of its responsibilities. For that reason, Islam introduced community worship. Islam also enjoins the group not to neglect the individual, obligating it to safeguard his various interests, to respect his rights and freedom, and to harmonize different interests. In Islam, praying in groups is preferred many times over praying individually.

The individual is thus an integral element of the Islamic society: he perfects it and is perfected by it, gives to it and receives from it, protects it, and is protected by it. Developing this two-way responsibility is Islam's principal way of achieving reform and social solidarity. Islam has impressed the meaning of these two types of responsibility on the individual and collective conscience to guarantee for Muslims the life of a unified, sound, happy, and productive body in a classless community.

According to the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him):

“Every one of you is a shepherd, and every one of you will be questioned about those under his rule: the ruler is a shepherd and will be questioned about his subjects; the man is a shepherd in his family and will be questioned about those under his care; and the woman is a shepherd in the house of her husband and will be questioned about those under her care... Thus, every one of you is a shepherd and is responsible for those under his care.” (Al-Bukhari)

In the words of the Glorious Qur'an:

*{Hast thou observed him who belieth religion? That is, he who repelleth the orphan, and urgeth not the feeding of the needy.}* (Al-Ma'un 107:1–3)

*{Those who entered the faith... prefer [the fugitives] above themselves though poverty become their lot.}* (Al-Hashr 59:9)

Islam has the individual say in his invocations:



*{Place not in our hearts any rancor toward those who believe.}* (Al-Hashr 59:10)

When this precept is practiced to the full, the heart of the individual is dedicated to society and to his complete submergence in it.

To the group, Islam declares that believers are none other than brothers:

*{Therefore make peace between your brethren.}* (Al-Hashr 49:10)

The blood of the Muslims shall be answered for, for the least worthy among them is entitled to their protection, and their hand is lifted against those who are against them. As the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said:

*“Help your brother whether he is the doer of wrong or wrong is done to him.” The Companions asked, “O Messenger of Allah! We can help a man to whom wrong is done, but how could we help him when he is the doer of wrong?” The Prophet replied, “Hold him back from doing wrong.”* (Al-Bukhari)

An outstanding illustration of the decree that society be responsible for the individual's behavior can be found in this parable by the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him):

*“The example of the person abiding by Allah's order and restrictions in comparison to those who violate them is like the example of those persons who drew lots for their seats in a boat. Some of them got seats in the upper part, and the others in the lower. When the latter needed water, they had to go up to bring water (and that troubled the others), so they said, ‘Let us make a hole in our share of the ship (and get water), saving those who are above us from troubling them.’ So, if the people in the upper part left the others to do what they had suggested, all the people of the ship would be destroyed, but if they prevented them, both parties would be safe.”* (Al-Bukhari)



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## **Mutual Reform in Muslim Society: A Collective Mandate**

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This understanding between individual and society of common responsibility for common interests is the basis for resisting social ills, and every method for achieving reform would remain fruitless unless preceded by such an understanding. Man’s position as Allah’s representative on earth and as trustee over its resources cannot assume a definite form until he recognizes this social responsibility.

Those who seek to resist social ills are duty-bound to awaken first the conscience of the individual toward the community, and then the conscience of the community toward the individual. They must also stress the implications of these two types of responsibility. This must continue until the individual assumes a filial and beneficent attitude toward the community, and the latter a motherly and protective attitude toward the individual.

By recognizing these two responsibilities and reflecting on them, we derive what is commonly referred to today as the “general consensus” or “public opinion”—the alert guardian of the nation’s existence—if founded on foresight and unity of purpose and aim.

Public opinion is the fearful power which holds rulers and individuals in the right path, moves the nation to act justly, and causes it to tremble with anger if harmed or touched with corruption, just as the body of an individual would if similarly affected.



Public opinion is the sharpest weapon for ridding the community of its social ills and for accomplishing what laws fail to accomplish. It is the watchful eye that ensures the execution of laws and the observance of those ethical rules and righteous ordinances which the community enacts.

Islam thus takes special care to make public opinion the guardian against the individual's deviations and the community's excesses, enjoining the right and forbidding the wrong. Establishing the individual's and the community's mutual responsibility is one of the most important acts of Islam and the soundest possible foundation for a righteous social life.

In the Qur'an we read:

*{And the believers, men and women, are protecting friends one of another; they enjoin the right and forbid the wrong.}* (At-Tawbah 9:71)

*{And there may spring from you a nation who invite to goodness, and enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency. Such are they who are successful.}* (Aal ` Imran 3:104)

And according to a Prophetic hadith, when the sons of Israel fell into sin, their wise men preached abstinence, but they would not abstain. Thereupon, they (the good ones) sat with them in their sittings, ate with them, and drank with them. The Lord struck the hearts of some with those of others, and He cursed them with the tongue of David and Jesus, the son of Mary, for their defiance and transgression.

He who abides by what is right in the eyes of Allah ought not to be shaken if shown hostility by anyone, whoever he may be. Our greatest social ills stem from the fact that a righteous public opinion has yet to be formed.

Quite often individuals and groups will declare openly their hostility against the venerated tenets of religion, against the state, and against common rights—and yet others will not lift a finger to admonish, because they are unaware of their rights and duties.



People are disunited and selfishly inclined because they lack unified ethical and cultural training. Different streams have poured into them, diluting the moral character, thinking, and faith of the nation, and making one and the same object at once both right and wrong—right to one group and wrong to another.

To evaluate both individual and social responsibilities, and thus to establish a uniform, righteous public opinion, is impossible without preaching and persuasion. If everyone truly recognizes his rights and obligations, a united and strong public opinion would emerge, correcting that which has been distorted and removing the tainted.

## **Towards a Righteous Society**

Preaching with wisdom and fair exhortation in order to reach the depth of man's soul, to sow the seeds of goodness and love of truth in him, and to extirpate the roots of evil and the causes of ills from him is the indispensable beginning. The key to every decision pertaining to righteousness is to reach the soul. The Glorious Qur'an refers to this when it says:

*{Lo! Allah changeth not the condition of a folk until they [first] change that which is in their hearts...}* (Ar-Ra`d 13:11)

Social education built on persuasion was one of the powerful weapons used by Islam for achieving social righteousness. The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) constantly utilized the Qur'an, his own example, and words to penetrate the hearts and minds of men, so they might learn the truth and attain righteousness, uphold reason, and dispense with pretexts laid before themselves and Allah.



For that reason, the period of law-making and securing commitments followed the period of calling to Allah's worship. The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings be upon him) continued to summon people for thirteen years until his call had filtered into their hearts and they had begun to occupy themselves in their assemblies with his message, inquiring into its great truth. Only after the Message had spread and a supporting public opinion had been formed for it in Yathrib did Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) call for the establishment of a Muslim state as the guardian of law and enjoin adherence to its tenets.

Thus did Islam attend to the ills of Arabian society at that time: first by summoning, then by legislating. Today, those who wish to attend to society's needs should follow this course. They must look upon the message as the foundation of righteousness before they can legislate. They must abandon haste in favor of a gradual process of legislation. Only in such a manner can they prepare the atmosphere and make society ready to receive orders and accept commitments.

Briefly, then, Islam first used the message to reform society and resorted to legislation thereafter to protect the objectives of the Message. Islam made faith and right-doing the principal goals of every facet of life. Rights and obligations for both the individual and the community were given substance according to the precepts of right-doing. Every obligation, as well as every right recognized in Islamic society, revolves around right-doing toward the individual or the community, and every act that would remove good and bring forth evil—whether it yields gain to its perpetrator or to another—is forbidden.

No armor is more suitable for resisting evil and the ills of society than Islamic ethical upbringing. For this reason, we find that Islam has concerned itself with all phases of life, defining the nature of responsibility within the limits of each phase for the purpose of realizing the overall objective: a life of contentment for all peoples of the world as a prelude to a more exalted and happier life in the next world.



The Prophet of Islam (peace and blessings be upon him) absolved no one person from his responsibility toward another. The Commander of the Faithful is responsible for the believers, his deputies and trustees for those under their jurisdiction, the head of the family for his family, the wife for her home, and the individual for his neighborhood as for himself. In the last analysis, every individual in the Islamic community is responsible for the rectitude of the entire community because, as we have seen, he is charged with the task of raising himself and summoning others to Allah for the sake of rendering this society upright. He preaches truth and cooperation to achieve beneficence and piety.

## **Solidarity in Traditional Muslim Communities: A Living Example**

The emphasis on individual and collective responsibility is part and parcel of the teaching of right-doing — the second fundamental of Islam after belief in the one Allah. No armor is more suitable for resisting evil and the ills of society than Islamic ethical upbringing, upon which the fortunes and status of men in Islamic society have always rested. It is the element which solidifies the community and preserves it from decay.

Muhammad's Message emphasized and bolstered interdependence and solidarity among the newly converted Muslims until the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) had molded the *Ansar* of Yathrib and the *Muhajirun* of Makkah into an all-encompassing brotherhood which ultimately transcended brotherhood based on lineage and kinship.

The Message gave rise to a closely knit and unified nation which became the font of all authority; the consensus of that nation was law, and its word was decisive. This nation came to vouch for its members, who became a responsible living force — enjoying a faith and possessing a religion perfected only through loyalty to the community and sacrificing for its cause:

*{Think not of those who are slain in the way of Allah, as dead. Nay, they are living. With their Lord they have provision.}* (Aal `Imran 3:169)





In Islamic communities that have preserved Muslim traditions, I have witnessed an incomparable sense of interdependence and solidarity which no social architect could improve on as a basis for a world society.

I have seen certain Tuareg tribes of North Africa display this blissful solidarity in their lives. No one among them lives for himself only; he lives for his people.

My attention was first attracted to them by a Muslim who left his own country and settled among the Tuaregs in Fezzan. He enjoyed their protection, lived by their gracious bounty, and then departed in search of a living in order to repay them their favor, leaving his family in the protection of this Islamic community.

But ill luck accompanied him, and he was unable to earn enough. He came to us in Misurata in Tripolitania seeking aid; it was offered to him so he could return to his family.

He returned to Misurata after an absence of about a year. It was assumed at first that he was returning from his family, but this was not the case. When asked why he had not gone back to his family after the first encounter, he replied:

“Since we last met, I have traded with what came into my hands, and what I now possess is sufficient to take back to the Tuaregs.”

“To the Tuaregs,” I inquired, “or to your children?”

“To the Tuaregs first, for they nourished my children during my absence. I will now be responsible for the children of those absent among them, and I will divide what Allah has granted me between my children and those of my neighbors.”

He was asked whether the entire community shared his attitude toward neighbors, and he replied:



“We share together and alike in blessings and misfortunes; grace is with him who displays it, and a member would be ashamed to return to the camp empty-handed — in shame not before his household members but before his neighbors, who await his return in the same manner as does his family.”

As a modern non-Muslim writer puts it:

“In Muslim society, the family will always care for its old people, its orphans, its idiots, its ne’er-do-wells, and even its delinquents. In this it offers a marked contrast to the modern West, where relatives are all too often looked upon as disagreeable acquaintances and where the misfits are frequently left to their fate or thrust into public institutions. If Islam is not a welfare state, it at least produces whole welfare families where everyone is cared for whether they deserve it or not.”

## **Conclusion: Toward a Righteous Islamic Society**

This communal spirit is not a peculiarity of the Tuaregs and similar desert folk, nor is it a condition of their tribal solidarity; it is rather the Islamic spirit, more evident among those who still live in seclusion from modern materialistic life.

This spirit is to be observed in Islamic villages and towns which still bear faithfully the stamp of Islam — whether the town is in the East or in the West, and whether the inhabitants are Arabs or non-Arabs, whites or blacks. Muslim peoples in many localities still live the life of plenitude, contentment, interdependence, and solidarity in search of beneficence. They still remain close to being that righteous society ordained by the propagator of the Message, Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him), as contrasted with tens of millions of Muslims who have been seduced by modern materialistic cultures and who live for themselves and prefer to gratify their lusts rather than to be beneficent toward even their relatives — let alone their neighbors.

**By Abd al-Rahman Azzam**